DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 649 CS 213 978

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TITLE Academic Feminism's Subtle Violence against People of Color.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consciousness Raising; *Cultural Context; *Feminism; Higher Education; Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; Racial Bias; *Social Theories
IDENTIFIERS Beloved (Morrison); Bleich (David); *Cultural Sensitivity; Feminist Criticism; Morrison (Toni)

ABSTRACT

David Bleich, in his analysis of Toni Morrison's "Beloved," is representative of theorists and practitioners who misrepresent feminism and women's issues. In his essay, "Reading from Inside the Outside of One's Community," Bleich converts a book about the strength and dignity of an African-American woman into a male-bashing tract that results in equating the chores of a middle-class housewife with the brutality and violence of slavery. Bleich, as a representative of "academic feminism," looks at women as helpless victims, in need of rescue and reassurance by men to survive; uses the white female model of family and disenfranchisement to guide his students to "understand" the book; and engages in a dialogue that suggests that individual men, not white patriarchal structures, are to blame for enslavement and oppression. In doing this, Bleich reproduces the mistake of many white educators by using the white model of family and of oppression to help students relate to Morrison's novel. The academic feminism represented by Bleich is a divisive element that alienates women of color and reduces women's struggle to a trivial whining rather than addressing the real issue of continuing violence against women, the lack of economic opportunity, the misogyny of the mass media, and the dismissal of women's knowledge and contributions to society. (NH)

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ED 360 649

Academic Feminism's Subtle Violence Against People of Color

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I'd like to start out this presentation by relating a personal experience. But it's not just one experience; it's the same story over and over. I've overheard similar versions of this conversation repeatedly, whether it be in the classroom, at a social gathering, or in the English department lounge. White women, who think of themselves as feminists--at least they describe their perspectives as "feminist"--(and they're usually young, in their twenties and thirties, though in various stages of their professional careers) will bemoan their lack of success in establishing relationships with men. The men haven't been treating them as equals--it's their lot in life to be married to a sexist--or they've just broken up with someone or they feel their significant other is not spending enough time working on the relationship or they've been unable to attract the type of men they're interested in--all the "good ones" are already married or aren't looking for a serious commitment right then. Then will come the big sigh, followed by the exclamation, "Sometimes I think I would be better off if I didn't know all that I do." And, of course, all of these "feminists" will nod their heads in agreement, finding solace, I guess, in this statement that takes responsibility off of themselves and puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of feminism. And, naturally enough, men.

I've felt compelled to keep my mouth shut for a long time although a resounding "Bullshit!" has been echoing in my thoughts. My reaction--my first suppressed impulse--has always been that these women are having trouble not because of what they know, but because

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they do not know enough. They've equated feminist struggles with a line of rhetoric and somehow think that if they didn't know that the problem existed, that they would not be suffering through it. I figured it was the old "ignorance is bliss" folly, a lack of recognition that women have been mistreated and their ideas dismissed and that feminism is the response to those problems, not the creator of them. And I've been content to ignore these women's reasoning so as not to alienate my sisters or to dampen their enthusiasm for their studies. But I no longer can. This type of feminism, if you want to call it that, has been entering the classroom, and I worry that the popular media's gross misrepresentation of feminist values is being verified by female instructors and students whose feminist critiques begin and end with this line of reasoning--"if only I didn't know all that I do."

This response by these young, white feminists encompasses many hidden assumptions, among them: 1) That women are victims and that they can do nothing constructive to rise above their victimization; 2) That white women's perceptions of their oppression is the focal point of feminism; and 3) That men must change, not women. These assumptions are disturbing to say the least when voiced by women instructors, but when major theorists espouse them also, I start to worry. In Cahalan and Downing's *Practicing Theory*, David Bleich steps into the fray with an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that I not only found offensive, but dangerous. I'd like to spend a little time here analyzing it, as the method of teaching Bleich recommends in this article epitomizes classroom practices that, under the banner of feminism or of sensitivity to women's issues, are doing a great violence to women in general and women of color in particular.

I suppose I should note here that Bleich is, of course, a man and that his pedagogical beliefs could be seen simply as a man trying to co-opt feminism out of misunderstanding or

for a need to control feminism and by extension women. To say this, though, would be to do Bleich a great injustice. He is not an anomaly in what I will call "academic feminism;" he is representative of it, whether or not he is a man. In fact, unlike other feminists, I do not believe that feminism is for women and that men have nothing to say about women's issues. Feminism is an attitude that knows no gender boundaries and has as much to offer men as it does women. So, I will look at Bleich not as a man writing about feminism, but as a major theorist and practitioner who, in this case, is the best representative of this misrepresentation of feminism and women's issues.

The name of Bleich's essay is "Reading from Inside and Outside of One's Community." Although I do not find his ideas particularly complicated, I do not have the time here to adequately summarize them. In brief, he feels that students try to distance themselves from other cultures by not trying to relate to the experiences portrayed in novels by members of minority cultures. He uses passages from Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes* and Morrison's *Beloved* to demonstrate in a very confused manner that students can indeed relate to the problems and concerns of oppressed cultures. It is when Bleich focuses on *Beloved* that he gets himself into trouble, however. Somehow--I still gasp in disbelief every time I reread it--Bleich manages to convert this book about the strength and dignity of an African-American woman into a male-bashing tract that results in equating the chores of middle-class housewives with the brutality and violence of slavery.

Bleich makes many lamentable claims in his circuitous treatise, and, again, I hardly have time to take him to task point by point. But as far as the concerns of this paper go,

what Bleich does is 1) to look at women as helpless victims, in the need of rescue and reassurance by men to survive, 2) to use the white female model of family and disenfranchisement to guide his students to an "understanding" of the book, and 3) to engage in a dialogue that suggests that individual men, not white, patriarchal structures, are to blame for enslavement and oppression.

We've all seen women portrayed as victims before, so it's certainly nothing new, but for a man of Bleich's stature and feminist beliefs to perpetuate it is truly sad. But there in his analysis is a condemnation of Paul D for not resisting Beloved's advances, calling Beloved the "invincible object of Paul D's sexual license." Somehow, Beloved (and Sethe for that matter) are incapable of taking responsibility for their own sexuality. Bleich can only portray them as victims of men's lust, invoking a rape metaphor wherein the man orchestrates the whole sexual encounter and takes advantage of the woman. Any reader of *Beloved* will immediately see the nonsense behind Bleich's analysis of the seduction scene, but Bleich, apparently, believes that the women in this novel are incapable of demonstrating sexual needs and the ability to pursue them. Furthermore, Paul D is implicated somehow for returning to Sethe "too late," as if he could have/should have saved her. Bleich actually blames this ex-slave for not rescuing her, as if Paul D had the power to do so and Sethe did not. Nowhere does Bleich mention that Sethe and her daughter Denver existed without men for years and that any rescuing of Sethe that went on in the book was done by women, not men. It seems Bleich is reluctant to examine these relationships which point to the value of a matriarchal society.

The violence done to people of color, however, is what should really make Bleich feel ashamed. I hate to keep repeating this, but I do not have the time here to fully explore the depths of Bleich's ethnocentricity however strongly I might feel it needs to be exposed and critiqued. Still, Bleich reproduces the mistake so many white educators are guilty of: he uses the white model of family and of oppression to help his students relate to Morrison's novel. I imagine many people feel that this type of instruction is good, that it is an admirable goal to remove detachment from the students' reading of literature and to show them how they are implicated in novels such as *Beloved.* Others might feel that oppression is oppression no matter what form it takes and that this equation of white female housework to black female enslavement reveals a pattern necessary if we are to emancipate ourselves. My answer is simple, and I speak as a white woman: no white person can possibly understand what it means to be black nor can she relate to the type of racism African-Americans are challenged by everyday. Therefore, whites cannot possibly understand how it feels to read about ancestors who never knew freedom, and responses to a book such as *Beloved* must be accompanied by a little humility, not, as Bleich suggests, an ignorant proclamation of "Oh, I can relate."

My third point emerges from the first two, but is distinct enough for me to discuss it briefly here on its own. It's so easy for Bleich to find a villain in *Beloved.* After all, it's much easier to divide the world in easily distinguishable categories than to explore its complexity. But with all the slaveowners and white sadists in Morrison's novel, Bleich manages to vilify Paul D, a black man who has endured horrible indignities. Rather than

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being seen as a survivor and a man trying to preserve what little decency he's found in the world, Paul D is portrayed by Bleich as being, and I quote, "the weak, cowardly apostle of male sexuality." I'm not sure I understand his reasoning, but Bleich looks at Sethe as a victim, but he sees another ex-slave as the oppressor. Bleich's claim is rather shocking; he suggests that racial slavery is, and again I quote, "a subcategory of the universal slavery of women who are associated only with domestic life and children." Keeping this logic in mind, Paul D then must be responsible for his own enslavement, being a man who obviously must be the oppressor in this hierarchy Bleich has set up, and white women must be excused from their implication in racism. This is academic feminism run amuck. Bleich male bashes, picking on individual men, and then tries to generalize into a notion of oppression that decontextualizes oppression from race and class. Individual men become the ones to blame.

The fact that Bleich wrote this article (and that he believes what he wrote) frightens me. But I was mortified when I saw the reaction of the white women in my classroom when we read this article. Only one woman objected to it, and she was content in saying that Bleich's examples and comparisons were a bit extreme. None of these self-proclaimed feminists saw the violence of this article against people of color. I was flabbergasted. But then I made the connection. Bleich was merely following the company line of academic feminism. Using literature, he was reiterating what those young feminists I mentioned earlier were saying in the coffee lounge; he was echoing their complaints; he was assuring them that men are the enemy; he was, ultimately, affirming their belief in victimization.

The result, of course, is that this academic feminism, this selfish, self-righteous, pitiful

identification with women's issues, will be taught, both by the teachers in the lounge and the women in the graduate class who I mentioned (who are all preparing to be teachers at various levels). I want to argue right now that academic feminism is not what feminism should be about. Academic feminism is a divisive element that alienates women of color and reduces women's struggles to a trivial whining. It's another way of studying the middle-class white model and universalizing it. There are real issues out there, including the continuing violence against women, the lack of economic opportunity, the misogyny of mass media, and the dismissal of women's knowledge and contributions to society. These issues are matched by similar violence done against people of color. Academic feminism needs to respond to both sets of issues, as women of color encounter them both, which makes racial issues women's issues. Concentrating on male-bashing, or on the problems of the dating game, or on being a victim, saps women's energy and removes us from serious negotiation with patriarchal structures.

I, for one, will not live my life as a victim. As a woman, I am better than that. I am stronger than that. My rhetoric does not consist of asking men to see me as an equal and then complaining when they don't. I assume I am an equal. I know I am an equal. And I act accordingly. My efforts in feminism, then, are not to liberate myself, but to pay increasing attention to the needs of the other. I'd like to conclude this presentation, then, by outlining the basis of a pedagogy that can be used in both composition and literature classrooms that will, I think, give students a culturally aware understanding of gender issues.

I propose that classrooms make the patriarchal structure the focal point of their writing

and literature courses. But rather than assuming fault, let the students find the issues. They should also be allowed to critique feminist ideology, rather than to be silenced when they disagree or be privately ridiculed thereafter. The texts in a class obviously cannot represent all of the diverse cultures present in our classrooms. Any pedagogy that tries to represent everyone will be succumbing to tokenism and the coverage model that Gerald Graff has so astutely critiqued. But cultural diversity must be sought after and women's voices of different races must be heard. I also suggest the playing of popular music as a text of sorts. I should also mention here that men need not be excluded in this feminist classroom. The patriarchy needs to be critiqued from their viewpoint, also.

The class activities need to be geared to both seeing similarities and recognizing differences. I suggest small group discussions and collaborations focusing on issues, such as the lack of economic opportunities, and have groups compose papers or present investigations that explicate the differences among gender, class, and culture concerning these issues. Role playing, a long neglected pedagogical tool that is infinitely valuable, should be used to further promote understanding. Rather than letting white women talk about how they, as housewives, relate to black enslavement, have them play the part of a female slave, whether in a classroom exercise, a formal essay, or in a rehearsed skit presented to the class. Finally, let all the students present something that represents themselves in relation to the patriarchy. I believe that popular songs can be very revealing here and that they allow for a dose of individuality that all the discussions of gender and cultural categories tends to overlook.

Feminist pedagogy must emerge from the shadow of privileged white female needs if

we are to overcome what is becoming more than just a media induced stereotype. Feminist instructors must be willing to learn within their own pedagogies about cultures above and beyond their own. They must not be seduced by seemingly universal claims, and they should learn to spot the rhetoric in academia that ever so subtlety promotes violence against people of color.